

Part 2: Oral history with Mark Penn conducted by Dr. Michael Cornfield

M Cornfield: I read those two polls as a part ...

M Penn: Did you bring them by any chance?

M Cornfield: Yes I did. They're right here.

M Penn: Not like ... 20 years ago.

M Cornfield: Yeah, yeah, of course. So, I want to talk about both what they said but the process of ... I was going to walk you through it ... of how they came to be, how you formulated the questions, how you interpreted the data, and then how you set out to persuade people that the data was significant both inside the White House and the Democratic party and outside in the public, and then what the consequences are.

M Cornfield: So, the first poll, let's start with Al Fromm. He was instrumental in both of these polls?

M Penn: Yes, absolutely.

M Cornfield: And tell me about your relationship with him and how that ...

M Penn: Well, it's pretty funny because all I remember was I was in the heat of the campaign and at that point I had this operation in the polls, new strategy, meetings, and then one day Al Fromm just shows up on my ... at my door. He must have gotten on my calendar or something, but I don't know if I had a calendar in particular in those days. And then he showed up and he explains to me everything about the DLC. I hadn't really been informed about the DLC at the time, and so he says, Fromm, he explains to me the history. He explains to me how they work for centrist policies. He usually uses as the example the earned income tax credit instead of the minimum wage and said could I do some polls, pretty much for them, to which I said, "Sure."

M Penn: But, I remember that it was ... I remember that meeting because it was ... I hadn't really known him and then he would have such a big impact later on

M Cornfield: This is in '96? '95?

M Penn: This had to be some time in '96 because it was in the heat of things. I don't think it would have been as early as '95.

M Cornfield: And were you committed win or lose, to do a post 1996 poll for the DLC? Or, did it really crystallize after the victory?

M Penn: I remember the dates ... Well, according to the method, this was conducted the weekend after the election, so they conducted it the weekend after the election. We would've been ready to go. We would have had the idea ... we definitely would've had the idea before that. And, I think that he traditionally had done post election polls and so in this case, he was now commissioning me probably he did Stan Greenberg in the past if I was guessing, right? Going back, because I think this was pretty much his concept that well, we would do the post election poll right after it, and I remember scoping out the timing.

M Cornfield: And the way it's framed is that the basic research question is to understand how and why Clinton won while the GOP maintained control of Congress. And, the answer was that Bill Clinton was a new kind of Democrat, not a traditional tax, spend, redistribute liberal. So, you've got an argument to make, right? How do you come up ... when you have something that you want to say that you really believe, like this, how do you come up with questions so that you're putting your thesis to a fair test? How do you formulate the alternatives?

M Cornfield: For example. On page six, there is a bar graph that has three options. And, it really lays out your argument, and I wonder how do you come up with that kind of stuff?

M Penn: Well, first of all, there was a philosophy, so there was a general sense of philosophy that the Republicans left people to fend for themselves and the left Democrats wanted to propose a government program to solve every problem, and so there was a center in there, where people would take, utilize the values of opportunity, community, and responsibility. And those values properly applied to policy, would provide a third alternative where people had a great equality of opportunity, but not an equality of result.

M Cornfield: And, is Clinton the author of that philosophy? Maybe there are many authors.

M Penn: But, let's call that the ... I don't know who the author is ...

M Cornfield: Or the DLC.

M Penn: ... but the DLC was the repository for that philosophy.

M Cornfield: And the instrument, right?

M Penn: And so, they came forward and President Clinton before I was there, had a new covenant. A new covenant was a concept that was close to that, but nevertheless, remember, when we came on, we were moving the president decisively into the center, and by moving him decisively in the center, we were going uphill. We were going for more suburban voters, the more soccer moms, more upper income voters.

M Penn: We were getting out of the traditional Democratic base that we thought would have been the shrinking base. It would've been a losing base in changing times. So, to go back to your question, how do you come up with these questions, well first it was a philosophy behind that you're testing out, and so if you look at this as what's the proper role of government, to solve problems and protect people from adversity, vs help to equip themselves to solve their own problems, or stay out of the lives of people, don't interfere, if you look at that, we view that as the right may have the smallest government you possibly can and the left was basically have a government that was trying to solve every problem for you, and so our middle was, the government's role was to equip people to solve their own problems. And, that's pretty dramatic result.

M Cornfield: That's not close.

M Penn: I am so fascinated by the fact that you pulled this out, is that I'm just going to rerun these questions next week or something.

M Cornfield: To see if there's a center left, remaining I mean to say?

M Penn: Yeah, to see how they come out, because ...

M Cornfield: Yeah, the next one was where I was going to take you next. What is the proper role of government? And again, the center that you're defining and that you moved the campaign into, was there. It's an outright majority. It may have been on the previous page too. I remember.

M Penn: Correct. And here it's even larger that the government should be focusing on economic growth, and then this all goes back to giving people a fish or you're teaching them how to fish, and it continually comes out, teach them how to fish. Give people an opportunity, give them the tools that they need to make it in the economy, but don't guarantee the outcome, and so a lot of what you see today too, is a reversion of a politics where people are trying to predetermine the outcome, or even worse, they're saying that the outcomes are unfair, and so that everything has to be remedial outcomes.

M Cornfield: Okay. So, you have this public philosophy, and it's stated in there that President Clinton began to move, sort of another front, to neutralize other issues, which you refer to as threshold issues. Fiscal responsibility, crime, welfare, family issues, and I want to make sure I understand the concept, and if I do, where this comes from, because I'm not really familiar with it, but it seems to be the idea that if you didn't address ... if the campaign here in '96 didn't address these issues in a satisfactory way, then the respondent and the voters minds would close and they wouldn't listen to anything else. Is that right or is that a little off?

M Penn: That is right, because basically voters saw the Democratic party as the tax and spend party. I should say, the tax spend and siphon the money into ...

M Cornfield: And redistribute ...

M Penn: ... who knows where, maybe redistribute, maybe waste it all.

M Cornfield: Oh I see.

M Penn: Right.

M Cornfield: Yeah, I get you.

M Penn: ... party, and so consequently, how could Bill Clinton prove that he might be for more aggressive use of government, he might be for a reasonably activist government, but how do you convince him that that activist government isn't just tax, spend and tax, spend, waste and redistribute, and the answer to that is by laying down some markers. It's like, "I want to spend everything I can, as long as our budget's balanced. And, I want to make sure that those programs that have been synonymous with waste, welfare, or those programs that require a certain toughness, whether it's police or defense, hey, I stand there too."

M Penn: And so, one of the big discoveries is that, if I said to you, "Okay, we should just have expanded healthcare for everybody." You'd say ... a certain group would be, "Okay, that sounds nice." Then, you point out, "Hey, how much is that really going to cost and whatnot," and then your opinion turns and then so only a limited group really would trust Democrats to put in a healthcare program like that.

M Penn: Now, if I say, "We're going to have expanded healthcare, but we're going to do it within a balanced budget, or we're going to do it within these fiscal targets and we're going to do it while we're curbing welfare," suddenly you now agree that we should expand healthcare, and I agree that you could be trusted to do that.

M Penn: So, it's always about ... it's a little bit of Nixon goes to China, they really believe the unlikely person to do it who has this, the balanced characteristic, so if I said today I was going to ... would I entrust Nancy Pelosi to manage it without spending, taxing and spending, because you know. So, providing that balance in the way people saw it, actually gave people permission to be for things, but to be for things in ways that had limits.

M Penn: Because, they got the sense that sure, shouldn't we have better and free education, better and free healthcare, better and free everything? Sure, why not. Except for the fact that it would overwhelm the system and the government and the tax base and we would spiral out of control, and the government would collapse and nobody would get anything.

M Cornfield: So, when you're trying to discern that voters have this mindset that you're describing, can you confirm that through poll questions, or do you need focus

groups to really see the threshold? That's what fascinates me here is how you came up with the concept of this threshold issue.

M Penn: Yeah, I banned focus groups, because they were just misleading, because they always produce whatever results you want.

M Cornfield: Okay. Okay. So then, how do you know that these issues and these positions on issues are pivotal?

M Penn: Because that turned out to be the difference between when we define swing one and swing two voters. The differential was if you were, "Sure, I'll go for those things as long as you show discipline and toughness."

M Cornfield: And you would put that in the question wording.

M Penn: Well, what we do is, we would run all the things people were for and then we'd run and we'd see that everybody was for more stuff, but the swing two voters ...

M Cornfield: Remind me what those are again.

M Penn: Well, the swing two, if you were to then divide the country up into Dole base and Clinton base, and those who were closer to being traditional Democrats and those who would be swing one and those who were closer to the Republican philosophy, but independence would be swing two, and the differential, what we find is, if we took all of the issues that people supported, what we really found is that the difference was the swing two voters supported the very strongly, the balanced budget, the welfare reform, dealing with child support payments, all the things that implied strong responsibilities.

M Penn: So when you look at the DLC values of opportunity, community and responsibility ... later on I worked with somebody on a race report, and they came back and they said they redefined the values as opportunity, community and heart. And, I said, "No, no, you've missed the entire point. It is the addition of those responsibilities." Are you giving people the ... are you referring ...

M Cornfield: That's really the pivot isn't it? Heart in quotes vs responsibility.

M Penn: And are you giving people a scholarship, or are you giving people a scholarship if they get a B. Are you okay with people not making their child support payments or are you really cracking down and making sure those payments, and their responsibilities as a father are met? Are you requiring, making work requirements for welfare, or are you just giving out welfare?

M Cornfield: And this is an evolution from the new covenant, because the idea of a covenant is an agreement. We'll do this if you take the responsibility to do that.

M Penn: Correct. And I think this is a little bit of, look if you want ... at the time, in 1996, to get close to a majority or more of the voters supporting you, you had to convince the way to do that was to combine those things that people universally wanted with a sense of really fiscal discipline and willingness to combat crime and enforce responsibility in the programs.

M Penn: Because, if it's a responsible program, who wouldn't want to give somebody who's getting B a scholarship? Would you want to give somebody who's really not doing the work and just barely getting by with C's and D's. They're not really showing responsibility of the benefit. That's what the swing two voters were looking for.

M Cornfield: And, since as the report says, President Clinton had already moved to the center to cut Republicans off at the pass well before the election. Is this being articulated as early as say the '96 state of the union address?

M Penn: Yes. Definitely. So, this is definitely, to the extent that this ...

M Cornfield: That one's later. We'll come back to that one.

M Penn: No, but to the extent that this poll then is not discovering something new, it's verifying what [crosstalk 00:16:41]

M Cornfield: And, you're juxtaposing it against the rather dramatic differential results between the president and the Congress.

M Penn: Right.

M Cornfield: Yeah, yeah. So, welfare to work was the big decisive one in terms of convincing people that Clinton's new Democrat had substance, that it meant something. Would you agree with that?

M Penn: I would agree with the day that he signed welfare reform was the day we thought we had absolutely won the campaign. It was all over. There was a lot of debate that day. Hillary came in, she really didn't ... there was a lot of debate and discussion before he signed that, internally, in the White House.

M Cornfield: Hillary was opposed.

M Penn: Hillary was opposed at that time.

M Cornfield: Okay, interesting.

M Penn: And proposed a ... she was opposed for definitely ... had some sharp questions.

M Cornfield: Had some misgivings. Yeah. Fair. Okay. Family values initiatives, family medical leave act, violent television, school uniforms, tobacco, this also was targeted to swing two?

M Penn: That was really to soccer moms. That was really targeted to moms who ... I should say parents who felt that the modern world, with everyone going to work and with technology they couldn't really understand or figure out, but only the kids knew how to operate, was basically getting around them, and that they were losing the ability to control their kids. And so, as I always say, parents didn't want any more government in their lives, but they were okay with some more government in their kids' lives.

M Penn: And so, all of these things operated and basically the war on tobacco too, all of these things offer to, as we used to say, put the remote control back in the hands of parents. And so, the V chip was a big failure, but as a political concept, it was great, and it did work.

M Cornfield: Boy that seems such a long time ago, given what we have now.

M Penn: Well, it was a victim of the pace of technology.

M Cornfield: Yeah, internet.

M Penn: It was, but at the time, dealing something with the ... doing something with the hugely violent games, giving parents a little bit of control and making them the ones to say, "Okay, you can watch the R rated movie," as opposed to the kids just slipping it in. So, these things really ... to the extent that now you were looking at parents who couldn't be there the same number of hours that they used to be, couldn't have as much oversight as they used to be, and who also needed more help because women were in the workforce, so the family medical leave act was seen as a godsend to people.

M Cornfield: Yeah. Okay, so this one you may not remember, and I would understand if you didn't, but just in case you do, were there any surprises when the results came back, the poll results? Did anything cause you to say, "Oh, I didn't expect that," or "this is new." Or, did it basically just confirm what your weekly polling and your sense of things was all along?

M Penn: Yeah, at this point I had so much polling that I knew how things were likely to come out. This was not going to be a surprise.

M Cornfield: Okay. The poll is done. You release it. What was the reception? How did liberal wing of the Democratic party react, how did the press react, and then, what were the consequences in terms of the kinds of candidates who were getting ready to run in 1998 on the Democratic label? Were there more Clinton Democrats? Did they get the point?

M Penn: Well, I think this became the accepted philosophy of the day. It was overwhelmingly powerful in the way that Bill Clinton won, even if by the end, people thought, "Well, Dole wasn't the strongest candidate." Nevertheless, the change that people saw in the president and the presidency, was so strong and so different from the outcome for Democrats at large, that, for example, if you go back and look at the speeches of Hillary, she's accepted this 100%.

M Penn: So, she's accepted at 100%, people are really calling us to spread this new word. We're not getting a lot of blow back then. We're getting encouragement, and I think we won the argument and we showed the biggest proof point that you possibly could, which is the president was back.

M Cornfield: And, not only that, but he won with a majority, it wasn't ...

M Penn: Well, 49 points. That's because of Ralph Nader.

M Cornfield: Oh, Nader.

M Penn: Well, Perot was there and Nader, but Nader actually, as I would say, just took too many votes in California. Very close.

M Cornfield: Okay, so, a year later, November '97, you have another poll/report called the new Democratic electorate. And here you have a Pew pie chart that divides Democrats and potential Democrats into five groups and your argument is that two of those groups who you call new economy Democrats and suburban values Democrats now make up a majority of the party and that the social conservatives, the pro government Democrats and the economic liberals are receding. And, this is a major statement.

M Cornfield: The composition of the party is changing. The boat has taken off in a more centrist direction. So, my first question is I see that you divided up the people who answered your polling questions into these groups. You sorted them on the basis of their answers to a bunch of questions, and in particular to what they said were their most important concerns.

M Cornfield: I'm recapping, because I know this was a while ago and I'm not trying to teach you stuff you obviously came up with.

M Penn: This is so much better than I remember.

M Cornfield: So, my question is, when I spent time at Pew, I was not a pollster, but I did spend some time there, and I watched them do these kinds of polls, and they did something called cluster analysis, which the math is beyond me, but as I understand, the concept is that it's like what we teachers do when we grade on a curve. They look for the natural splits. Is that what you did here? Do you remember? How did you come up with these five groups and why not six? Why not three?

M Penn: Yes, well generally what I would do is do cluster analysis first and then throw it away.

M Cornfield: Interesting. Why?

M Penn: Well, because ...

M Cornfield: They're in the same category as focus groups.

M Penn: Well, cluster analysis is useful, but the clusters that are generated through the automatic algorithms, don't always match ... they give you some insight, but they don't actually ... they're usually not perfectly aligned with an expert's view of the electorate, but they're very useful. So, in that sense, usually what I do is run the cluster analysis, take a look at it, see if you can identify the clusters, because remember they don't come neatly labeled. They're just statistically significant groupings, and then go back and then create other questions by which you can run a more straightforward analysis.

M Cornfield: That's really fascinating. Can you give an example?

M Penn: Well, that's how these would've been done, because that's how I had done it, because I used to do all this stuff, but I really found that you couldn't slavishly apply it. And so then, it's interesting. We're doing a project now to come up with a typography of the current electorate and then part of this then becomes ...

M Cornfield: This seems to me to be a strategically invaluable method, so that's why I'm curious about it. If I'm about to run a campaign, if I'm about to disperse money to different campaigns, and I can get a sense of how the electorate is naturally subdividing now, I have a real tool.

M Penn: Well, that's right. Then, particularly today, where you can target it more effectively, what we would say. In those days, you'd say, "Well look. What coalition?" If I said that, "Look, here are five groups of voters," and they might all agree that curing cancer's a good idea, but primarily they have certain, either value set or issue set that drives them, that's more important to them, and so, understanding that ... so if you look at this 19% of the time we're social conservatives, the interesting thing is if I redid this, I would think the social conservatives may well have been driven out of the party entirely.

M Penn: I'd probably still be looking ... I've got ...

M Cornfield: The way you define them is a combination of what they say their priorities are and then within the priorities ... oh demographics. I was going to say then what their positions are, but you're saying demographics.

M Penn: I'm saying because it's a combination of demographic lifestyle with issues. And so, if you look at suburban values, that implies that cluster is going to live primarily in the suburban area. If they're in the suburban area, they're there because they're family oriented. It's a function of the geography. They needed more land and territory and schools and whatnot, and then you're going to have certain values that relate to how your kids are treated in all of those family medical leave, tobacco, V chips and so forth. And, you might even have some connection to community planning.

M Penn: But the new economy Democrats were really driven by, "Okay, the openness, global ..." they were really driven by basically the globalization and the development of technology. And so, to the extent, those voters represented a shift. They were something new. They didn't really exist before. You'd never had a free trade Democrat before Clinton.

M Penn: So, this was part of a switch in the parties from free trade being the Republican, economic liberals were pretty straight forward and pro government Democrats, they wanted to expand all the programs. So, looking at this, these two categories, these categories had been around for a very long time, the question is ...

M Cornfield: The social conservative and the pro government Democrats.

M Penn: Right. And the economic liberals. I think these three had been there a long time. These two that were really new ...

M Cornfield: And are a majority.

M Penn: Correct. And so, what we're really suggesting is, "Hey, there's a new Democratic party. It doesn't look like this. It looks like this." The old segments are still there, but with the move to the suburbs, the greater push to education and income, that has led to a greater sense of globalization and free trade and technology, that they've created some new groups.

M Penn: And so, the modern Democratic party would look different from the Democratic party that was pitching these groups. And this of course, runs, if you notice, at the point there wasn't that much social liberalism, so if I were recasting this now, these might be the social liberals, social conservative, probably not. Pro government is probably big. The economic liberals might be twice as big.

M Penn: The new economy Democrats might be shrinking or might stay the same and suburban values probably. Part of what I was doing here was pushing the Democratic party more into the suburbs and trying to take the suburbs away from the Republicans.

M Cornfield: So, if you were to do the equivalent of this and do it 20 years later, do it today, you would start with a list of ... you'd have demographic data ...

M Penn: I'd have demographic data.

M Cornfield: You'd have issue priorities.

M Penn: And I'd probably run a cluster analysis first, take a look at it, see what's seems to be clustering, and then I'd go back and refine the analysis.

M Cornfield: And then you go in and you present this and from there, comes issue positioning and ...

M Penn: Well, first you have to look at some of these and say is it actionable in some way. First of all, where do we line up on that? So, it's not as though candidates are like sticks of chewing gum. They have a perspective and so Clinton could go right to suburban values and new economy voters and it's consistent with where certainly the positioning was by the end of 1996.

M Penn: And so, this was a platform for a modern party that can push out forward into the new and developing groups of voters here, based on changes of demographics, lifestyle, issues and globalization.

M Cornfield: Was this a hard sell when you presented this? Do you remember? Did you get pushback? Did you get flack?

M Penn: I didn't get a lot of flack in those days. Most of the flack I got was during the campaign.

M Cornfield: Right.

M Penn: See, it is interesting how big the social conservative group was then, because there's no question that social conservatives have fled. And so, the biggest problem now is a Lipinsky, having somebody who's a pro life Democrat or somebody who's under huge pressure to whether or not he would continue to be accepted in the Democratic party...

M Cornfield: Yes, yes. And, in both these reports, there's a rhetoric to the extent that if we can adjust the party and become known as a new Democratic party that this can ... this is a road map to a lasting majority coalition.

M Penn: I think that's right. There's no question that if ... nope, we have five minutes.

M Cornfield: Okay.

M Penn: So, we can push that ...

M Cornfield: That's okay, I got another session with you Monday, but within two years of this, or two and a half years of this, suddenly there's a Republican president, because

there's the Lewinsky scandal. There is the disputed election of 2000 and perhaps, and this is my question, Al Gore was not on board with this.

M Penn: Al Gore was on board, then he wasn't on board. Then, he was on board, then he wasn't on board.

M Cornfield: Okay.

M Penn: So, Al Gore marveled at the operation that we had, and so Al Gore hired us to work in his campaign, us and Bob Squire. And, Al Gore had some attitudes that I really didn't understand at the time, which was he hated President Clinton. So, during my time working for Al Gore, it consisted of President Clinton, "Tell Al to do such and such, and such and such, and go out on the education and so and so."

M Penn: And then I would go to Vice President Gore and say, "Well, President Clinton called and he thinks you should do little bit more ..." "Don't tell me what that guy"

M Cornfield: Really.

M Penn: Yeah. I stopped doing that pretty quickly.

M Cornfield: Was this because of Lewinsky?

M Penn: Yes. Basically, Al Gore believed that he, Al Gore, and these are pretty much his words, supplied Bill Clinton with the moral purity to win the election in 1992, and that he, Bill Clinton, was robbing Al Gore, who would later be caught molesting massage therapists, of the moral purity and depriving him of the election, and that the vice presidency was the worst job in the world. It was like, I think he called it the velvet glove, that you just had to get off.

M Penn: And so, Gore was in a rather difficult mood for this election campaign. Now, this physically manifested itself in that he then decided that I think somehow he decided he would move away from us and Bob Squire over to Carter Eskew and Bob Schrum. And of course, us and Bob Squire were clearly in the centrist wing, had created this entire winning philosophy and so I go on my honeymoon actually, and then when I come back from ... everything is great when I left for this two week period. When I come back, it's like neck and neck in New Hampshire and Al Gore is panicked and he then proceeds to ... he fires Bob Squire ...

M Cornfield: This is when? This is early 2000?

M Penn: Yeah.

M Cornfield: Okay.

M Penn: At first, he fires Bob who had been his lifelong consultant. When Bob died, they didn't let Al Gore talk at his funeral.

M Cornfield: Wow.

M Penn: Because Gore just threw him overboard and then, Carter and Schrum came in and they were basically from the left of the party.

M Cornfield: Carter Eskew.

M Penn: Yeah, well more Schrum even than Carter.

M Cornfield: Now, when you say Carter, you're referring to Carter Eskew. Just clarifying.

M Penn: And so, my days were limited with that crew, and then they fired me, I don't remember whether they brought Stan or whatever in, then they fired me, so then I was out, but then they weren't going anywhere, so then Al Gore me and secretly rehired me.

M Cornfield: That was when?

M Penn: That was more like June. May or June of 2000.

M Cornfield: So, it was before the convention.

M Penn: So then, I came up and said, "Look ..." I texted a zillion messages for him, I said, "Just run on peace and prosperity. All you got to do is run on continuing the good work that's been done to move the economy, to make it work for all these new voters and that aspect." So, he actually unveils that message, goes on the peace and prosperity tour. Schrum and Carter Eskew say that that doesn't have enough edge. It's not catching on adequately. They switch him over to people vs the powerful.

M Penn: People vs the powerful, of course, is just ... it's a left wing message that basically throws away the more centrist, and it's an, us vs them, it's a divisive message. I'm rehired, because they've abandoned my message now, and he loses, and as President Clinton will always say to me that if Al Gore had just listened to you, he would be president today.

M Penn: And, I don't know, Al Gore went to the convention and he moved increasingly left and liberal after the convention and he increasingly threw away what ... once he got rid of the whole Monica Lewinsky complex, he then inexplicably moved to the left after the convention rather than back to the center ...

M Cornfield: Having Lieberman notwithstanding.

M Penn: Having Lieberman notwithstanding, he moved increasingly over to liberal programs, tax and spend and as you said, tied/lost the election, but he could've won by several points, I believe, had he not gone down ... the people vs the powerful was divisive in the wrong way. We had overcome that message. We had bridged to the voters, and he turned those very same voters off, and that was the ... and I wrote a DLC thing basically after that, that he really didn't like, why Al Gore Lost, if you find that one.

M Cornfield: Okay, I'll look for that one. I'll look for that one. Okay. So, I will ... I think our time is up.